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Former Lynn Resident, RHS Graduate, Leads 10,000-Member Church In Dramatic Projects

By Dick Reynolds
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A 1949 Richmond High School graduate believes that the "highest worship of God is service to our fellow man" and he follows that belief on a scale that approaches the incredible for those wedded to practicality.

He is James Thurman Jones, 43, of Redwood Valley, Calif., a rural community about 120 miles north of San Francisco.

He's known generally, however, as Pastor Jim Jones to the thousands who are members of his church and to other thousands who know of his work in California and in South America.

A native of Crete in Randolph County who spent most of his boyhood years in Lynn, also in Randolph County, Pastor Jones has been in California for 10 years.

In that decade, his church, the Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ denomination, has grown from a meeting place in the garage of his home to 10,500 active members including congregations in Redwood Valley, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Michael J. Prokes, one of the church's associate ministers, says:

Members United

"Peoples Temple is made up of thousands of people from every racial, religious, and socio-economic background, united by a vision of brotherhood among all human beings.

"Since establishing this church 10 years ago, Pastor Jones has achieved tremendous things in the humanitarian field. . .

"As a bureau chief for the CBS television affiliate in Sacramento, I came to do a film documentary on Peoples Temple a couple of years ago and became so impressed with the program that I resigned my position to join as a full-time staff worker."

Another view is offered by Wade Rubick of Indianapolis, general counsel of the 1.5-million-member Disciples of Christ denomination. He said of Peoples Temple:

"From my numerous contacts with members and staff of the church, I can say they are the most committed and dedicated group of people I have seen in any church anywhere."

Pastor Jones puts it this way:

"I'm not an ardent fundamentalist. However, the church is required, through the admonitions of Jesus, to take care of its people.

"If every church attempted to meet its own needs by first taking care of the households of the faith, this nation would have the answer to the welfare state by taking the burden of providing for the people off the government, freeing the government to deal with other national priorities.

"We believe, then, in the Jeffersonian ideal that the government governs best which governs least."

Major Projects

Some of the major projects of Peoples Temple are care homes for orphans and senior citizens, a 40-acre ranch for retarded children, convalescent centers, college dormitories, and a refuge shelter for animals.

Prokes declares:

"Pastor Jones believes that through such voluntary action programs, the church can best help in combatting communism and other tyrannical systems that threaten a free society."

One of the most dramatic programs of Peoples Temple is the planting of 30 different crops on several thousand acres, at the Venezuelan border in South America.

The church also has acquired a ship, named the "Marceline," which can hold 50 tons of supplies. It is used to transport food produced in the church's agricultural mission to critical hunger regions.

Pastor Jones is the first to admit that these accomplishments aren't his alone. He credits members of the congregation and the associate ministers.

Pastor and Mrs. Jim Jones pose with their children and four grandchildren in a photo snapped recently.

While Peoples Temple lists its active member rolls at about 10,500, it is estimated that another 10,000 attend services of the three congregations with many of the latter also involved in the church's wide-ranging projects.

May Be Largest

Prokes says it may be the largest Protestant congregation in America. Because of that vast membership, talents in almost every field of endeavor are available for work and advice, he adds.

Peoples Temple members often wonder just how a new project will be accomplished. But most of them have become convinced that anything is possible. One such person is Phillip Blakey, an Englishman who is the captain of the church's ship. He said recently:

"When Pastor Jim Jones suggested we look into buying a big vessel, I didn't envision the practicality of the idea at the time. But now I can hardly believe how much more productive we've become in helping people who are really suffering from hunger and insufficient health care."

How are the various projects accomplished? Contributions to a church with a congregation ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 are considerable. The church sponsors many money-making events ranging from bake sales to concession stands at baseball games.

Perhaps most important is the contribution of church members, from volunteer labor to the counsel of lawyers, doctors and numerous ordained ministers who have joined the congregation.

Where Did It Begin?

Pastor Jones recently was selected by Religion in American Life as one of the top 100 most outstanding clergymen in the nation. The question then is posed: how did it all begin for this 43-year-old transplanted Hoosier?

His parents were James and Lynetta Jones. His father, a construction engineer, died in 1951 while young Jones was a student at Indiana University. His mother now resides with her son and his wife in California.

After growing up in Lynn, Pastor Jones spent his senior year in high school in Richmond to obtain courses needed to prepare him for college. He graduated from high school with honors.

He also worked at Reid Memorial Hospital to earn some extra money and it was there he met Marceline Baldwin, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Walter R. Baldwin, who now reside at 149 South West Sixteenth St.

She was a student in Reid's School of Nursing and they were married after his graduation from high school. She couldn't know then that a ship was to be named for her.

Pastor Jones first goal was teaching and he took education courses at Indiana University, later transferring to Butler University at Indianapolis.

His wife, in Richmond recently as her parents prepared to observe their fiftieth wedding anniversary, says it was about this time that her husband decided "he couldn't reach enough people in the teaching field and decided to enter the ministry."

Before graduating from Butler, young Jim Jones became at 21 a student pastor in Indianapolis and his organizational ability began to manifest itself.

Launches Campaign

He launched a campaign among members of both Catholic and Protestant denominations to build a recreation center for the children living on the south side of Indianapolis.

In later years in Indianapolis he formed the first Peoples Temple and more than 100 members followed him to California when he decided to move there to organize a church in a more progressive area, his wife said, and for the sake of his family.

While still in Indianapolis, he was named the first director of the Mayor's Commission on Human Rights. It was also in the early 1960s that he and Mrs. Jones spent two years in South America as missionaries and it was in this period that he developed the friendships which led to the agricultural mission his church has set up there. His friends aren't surprised that he also built an orphanage during that two-year stint.

An officially ordained minister of the Disciples of Christ long before he left Indianapolis, Pastor Jones combined in his early years in California the pastoring of a new church, public school teaching, and a business career.

But his goal was to establish a congregation "of principled persons who would practice literally the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and to visit the sick and imprisoned," a church leaflet recalls.

Pastor and Mrs. Jones have seven children, six of them adopted from impoverished and different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Another adopted child was killed in an auto accident before the family left Indiana.

In Modest Home

Pastor and Mrs. Jones and their children still at home reside in a modest cinder block house in Redwood Valley. He accepts no formal salary. Mrs. Jones, a registered nurse since her graduation from Reid school here, is a health care evaluator for the California Department of Health.

While in Richmond, she discussed her husband's work. She said, simply:

"He doesn't believe Peoples Temple is important. What is important is humanity."

In their early married years she said she doubted some of her husband's planned projects could be accomplished.

But she has no doubts now and hasn't for many years.

Pastor Jones, who remembers "very affectionately the neighborliness" of Lynn and Richmond, leads six to eight services a week in the three congregations.

The work of Peoples Temple involves other areas than those mentioned earlier, including a continuing battle against the use of drugs and the development of ways to assist rehabilitated youthful drug users and others through college and over the hurdles of legal problems. Pointing to the work of the church, the San Francisco Chronicle has said:

". . . this church is best known and highly regarded for its social works which include housing and feeding senior citizens and medical convalescents, maintaining a home for retarded boys, rehabilitating youthful drug users, and assisting non-members as well as members of the faith through college and legal difficulties."

Two Incidents

Meanwhile, Mrs. Jones and the files of The Palladium-Item provide two incidents which demonstrate the early concern of Pastor Jones for humanity.

Mrs. Jones remembers that she and her husband went to a nursing home to visit a member of their church while they still lived in Indianapolis. She recalls:

"The conditions were so pitiful that we picked her up bodily and carried her to our home. Terminally ill, she lived in our home until she died eight months later.

"The conditions at that nursing home gave my husband one of his early reasons to build care homes for the elderly."

This newspaper's files show a story written in 1953 by reporter William B. Treml. The story told of the young student minister, Jim Jones, and his campaign for a recreation center in Indianapolis.

But it also recalled an incident when Jim Jones was only 6 years old.

His mother told reporter Treml that her son saw a ragged, bearded tramp near their Lynn home. The year was about 1938.

A Child's Questions

As the child questioned the stranger, the man finally answered:

"I don't have a friend in the world. I'm about ready to give up."

The boy then said firmly:

"What do you mean, mister? God's your friend and I'm your friend. And mom will help you get a job."

Mrs. Jones did just that and Treml wrote in his story:

"The rejuvenation of a man who had lost hope marked a milestone in Jim Jones' life. His love for humanity and his desire to help the unfortunate was eventually to lead him to the ministry."

There is no way the reporter of 22 years ago could have realized how prophetic his words were.